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THE FRESHMAN ORIENTATION PROGRAM

..T HUNTER COLLEGE - FALL 1957

A Pilot Study of Freshman Reactions

by

Grace Robinson

SPONSORED STUDY No. 5
Office of Institutional Research
Hunter College of the City of New York
Spring 1958

ED000536

THE FRESHMAN ORIENTATION PROGRAM AT HUNTER COLLEGE - FALL, 1957

A Pilot Study of Freshman Reactions

This report presents a qualitative appraisal of the opinions, observations and recommendations made by a group of lower freshmen who were interviewed in a pilot study to evaluate the new Freshman Orientation Program which was introduced in September, 1957.

Before describing the results of the interviews, however, we need to review briefly the purposes and scope of freshman orientation. For many years the College has upheld the value of orientation for incoming students, the chief objective of which is the induction of these students as members of the college community as quickly and effectively as possible. Thus, through the years Hunter has provided orientation in the following general fields: rules and regulations of the College, academic and vocational planning, resources of the College, social and extra-curricular activities, basic concepts of a liberal arts education, transition from high school to college, and related aspects of college life. In addition, procedures relating to entrance tests, admission, pre-registration counseling, and registration have been, and still are, part of the over-all orientation program.

For several years, until the fall of 1957, orientation had been given to incoming students in two courses: Academic Orientation (15.31), and Personal and Social Orientation (10.1). During the last year before the new program was inaugurated, these courses were combined under the joint directorship of the Dean of Students and the Director of the Guidance Bureau and provided orientation in the fields previously noted. Classes met once a week, and students

received one-half credit for the course. One of the chief difficulties of the course, which troubled both faculty and students, was that much of the essential information came too late. It was of little help to the students, for example, if instruction in the use of the library was given after midterm examinations, but such scheduling was often unavoidable.

The new program introduced last fall replaced the orientation course and aimed to correct the major weakness of the latter by providing essential information for students before classes started, or shortly thereafter. Although under the same direction as the orientation course, the current program reflects the work of many other staff members of the faculty and the administration, as well as of upperclass students.

In the fall term, 1957, orientation was provided for 918 incoming students, (762 freshmen and 156 advanced standing students). Although orientation activities started early in September and continued through October, the week of September 9th was actually "Orientation Week," with a series of meetings providing intensive orientation in the main fields previously described. A copy of the complete program is attached (pp. 12-16).

Faculty and staff members and upperclassmen who have been functioning for several years in the college community are the logical persons to set up an orientation program for newcomers. But we must go to these newcomers themselves for answers to such vital questions as, "Did you get the information about college which you need?", "Was this information given to you in such a way that you understood it, remembered it and used it?" and, "Was your induction to Hunter a pleasant experience, inviting you to embark upon your college

career with eagerness, or an ordeal which made you hope fervently that the next four yea wouldn't be like <u>that</u>?"

Accordingly, we held depth interviews with 30 of the 762 freshmen, selected at random, to get answers to these questions. We developed a standardized interview form, a copy of which is attached (p. 16 , and recorded the students' comments as nearly verbatim as possible. We omitted students' names from the form for the reason that names are of no significance in a study of this kind, and we believed that the interviewees would express their opinions more freely if they remained anonymous.

Two questions on the interview form are directed at the students' unaided recall. One elicits the interviewee's first recall in connection with orientation and the other asks whether she has made specific use of any information she received in orientation. The "Other Comments" category on the interview form refers to the interviewees' aided recall of specific orientation activities. We assisted the students here by providing each one with a copy of the complete program, requesting them to express any comments they wished about any activity. We told them that this was not a test, and that they were not expected nor required to comment on every activity. Thus, the responses in the aided recall category also reflect some selectivity on the part of the interviewees.

At the start of each interview we asked each student to tell us the first thing she recalled about orientation, whether favorable, unfavorable or neutral. In each instance, this recall was unaided in that we had not yet discussed orientation activities nor had the interviewee been given a copy of the orientation program to refresh her memory. None of the interviewees had been told

beforehand the purpose of the interview nor the names of the other interviewees. We phrased this question relating to the first recall in general terms and gave no prompting. As we expected, some of the students commented about specific activities, whereas others described general impressions and "feeling responses" to the program as a whole or to particular aspects of it. For example, one interviewee said, "The first thing I recall is when two girls from school took groups of us upstairs and talked about teachers, tests, marks and how to study. This was helpful." (This comment refers to the small discussion groups led by upperclassmen - "College is Different"). Another student replied, "The first thing I remember is the crowds and confusion."

We believe that such selective, unaided recall gave us clues as to what in orientation was important to each student, and therefore what is presumed to have had the most impact on her, in comparison with other activities or aspects of orientation which she did not even mention or to which she referred in a casual, offhand way.

The specific orientation activities which the interviewees chose to comment upon in both the aided and unaided recall sections show a provocative agreement. Although we can attach no statistical significance to the frequency of response in these categories, it has meaning for those os us who develop orientation programs when students recall and comment on the same activities, without any prompting or assistance and with the same quality of response. For instance, in the unaided recall category, each of the following activities received more than twice as many responses as any other activity in the orientation program:

The Age of Reason
Social Orientation at Roosevelt House
College is Different
Regulations and Customs of the College Community

Each of these four also appears in the aided recall category among the activities which received responses from one-third or more of the interviewees .

As with most of the orientation meetings, attendance was required of all freshmen at these four meetings. "The Age of Reason" refers to the panel discussion between faculty members and upperclass students relating to some basic concepts of a liberal arts education. One of its main purposes was to demonstrate to the audience of incoming students the kind of intellectual interchange which may occur between students and faculty members in a liberal arts college - hence its title in the official program (p. 13, "The Liberal Arts Community in Action.")

"Social Orientation at Roosevelt House" dealt with social customs, behavior/relationships and relationships. Freshmen were divided into small groups for discussion purposes and talked about dating, social behavior at dances, teas and other college functions, and similar topics. Small groups of freshmen were formed also in the "College is Different" meetings. Each discussion group was led by two upperclass counselors, and the discussion centered around midterm and final examinations, instructors, grades, study habits in high school and college, and similar subjects of direct interest to students who are just entering college. More highly structured than these small discussion groups was the large meeting, "Regulations and Customs of the College Community," in which the Dean of Students and the Director of the Guidance Bureau spoke to the freshmen about general regulations and customs of the College affecting their social and academic activities.

Not only was the frequency of response high for these four activities in both the aided and unaided recall categories, but the nature of the responses was the same. Thus, in both categories the responses to "The Age of Reason" were overwhelmingly unfavorable, and the responses in both categories to the other three activities were highly favorable.

We will return later to the students' criticisms of "The Age of Reason," but first let us look at the reasons they gave for liking the other three activities. The interviewees almost unanimously emphasized the importance of the "feeling" which an activity imparted over the information it provided. They recalled, and responded favorably to, those activities which made them feel welcome as valued members of the Hunter community, and they preferred the easy, friendly, informal atmosphere of the small groups to the impersonality and formality of the large meetings. Thus, they responded favorably to the small discussion groups of "College is Different" and "Social Orientation at Roosevelt House" not so much for the information they gave us for the "warm and friendly" manner in which they were conducted. The only large meeting which received similar favorable response was the one relating to "Rules and Regulations of the College Community," but here also the interviewees spoke mainly about the "warm and friendly manner of the Deans who talked to us." It was not <u>what</u> the leaders said which had impact on the newcomers so much as the <u>way</u> they said it.

This general "feeling response" was reflected also in the section relating to specific use of orientation information. This question brought forth chiefly general responses, indicating that most of the students thought orientation had been helpful but they could not say precisely <u>how</u> it had been

helpful. "I guess I've been using it (orientation information) all the time," one interviewee commented, "but I can't think of any specific instance." Another student put it this way, "No. The information wasn't as important as the people."

Nevertheless, the students revealed that some of the information was indeed important and meaningful to them. Before describing this information specifically, let us look at some of the criteria they used to evaluate it. They tended to remember and use such information, for example, if it 1) bore a discernable relation to their previous experience, 2) was within the scope of their present knowledge, and 3) met their current needs as they understood those needs. On the other hand, they found it difficult to comprehend, and therefore to use, information which applied to aspects of college life with which they had no familiarity. One interviewee described it concretely when she said, "A lot of the information didn't make sense - you didn't understand it because you hadn't had any actual experience with it - and by the time you had the experience, you'd forgotten it."

The freshmen showed a clear interest in information which had practical application to their known needs. Almost half of the interviewees, for example, reported that they had attended the non-compulsory meeting, "Looking Ahead to Next Term," which was conducted by the Guidance Bureau and provided practical information as to program planning, and major and minor requirements. In this meeting the students were divided according to their groups, such as Social Science, Language, and so on, and thus many of these sub-meetings were quite large. Despite the size of the sub-meeting, however, most of the students were personally and directly interested in the information provided and hence

responded favorably to the meeting. In addition, nearly one-third of the students showed their interest in vocational information by attending another non-compulsory meeting dealing with "Vocational Futures," and they were unanimous in praising it. The students also expressed a need for more practical help with registration, finding their way around the building, knowing where to go for specific information, learning how to use the library, etc. Although they recognized the College's attempt to give them some of this information in orientation, particularly in the tours of the building and the library, they pointed out that the huge crowds and the confusion on these tours largely defeated their purpose.

The interviewees had high praise for the "College is Different" discussion groups on several counts. We have referred elsewhere to their preference for the easy, friendly, informal atmosphere of these small groups. In addition, however, they found these groups valuable because of the kind of information they received (the ways in which midterm and final examinations in college, for example, differ from high school tests), because of the effective leadership of the upperclassmen, and because of the friendships they formed with upperclassmen and other freshmen. Many of the students emphasized the importance of having discussions like these with upperclassmen who understand the problems and questions which beset most newcomers. Nearly all of the students added that they could speak more freely about the questions which troubled them most with upperclassmen rather than with faculty members. As one interviewee expressed it, "The upperclassmen know; they've been through it and they speak our language."

By their favorable recall, both aided and unaided, of specific activities

and information, the interviewees told us what had the most positive impact on them. But they also pointed to those aspects of orientation which had a negative impact and which, consequently, they rejected. Almost unanimously, they responded unfavorably to the large, crowded impersonal meetings, particularly when the information given in those meetings was not directly and personally meaningful to them. The "Club Fair" fell into this category, as did the meeting, "Out of Class Life at Hunter," (Program, p.12), which dealt with student government, extra-curricular activities, clubs and organizations on campus, etc. They regarded information as to clubs, student government and extra-curricular activities as of less immediate value than information relating to program planning, selection of a major, and vocational problems. The "Frosh Show" (Program, p. 14), which included hazing, skits, and stump speeches by candidates for class offices, was another large, crowded meeting which came in for heavy criticism. Many of the students pointed out that they had no advance information about the Show and hence very few students actually participated, and they were highly critical of the class election which followed immediately after the stump speaking and gave the students much too little time to evaluate the candidates.

Even if we surmount the hurdle relating to the size of the meetings, however, we will not have solved the whole problem. We must also find ways to relate the information we give them to their previous experience and their needs. Unless this information is within their frame of reference, they will reject it. An outstanding example of their rejection of an orientation activity which was completely beyond their frame of reference was "The Age of Reason" panel discussion. In interview after interview the responses to the

highly abstract philosophical concepts discussed at this meeting were strongly negative: "It was over my head." "I didn't know what they were talking about." "I was completely lost." But the most harmful consequence of this discussion was not its lack of positive impact on the students. By presenting content so far beyond the scope of their understanding, it only increased the students' feelings of inadequacy. One interviewee went directly to the heart of the problem when she said, "I felt awful because I didn't understand any of it." Most freshmen experience considerable anxiety and strong feelings of inadequacy as they take the big step from high school to college. Anything which increases their anxiety about their ability to measure up to the demands of college tends to generate more anger and resentment in them than a positive, constructive desire to learn.

On the whole, however, most of the interviewees described the orientation of incoming students is essential and many of them expressed a desire to help in future orientation programs when they become upperclassmen. The students indicated that, for the most part, college is serious business and they like it that way. Thus, they asked for practical help with the more serious aspects of college life: planning their future programs, selecting a major and minor, learning about vocational opportunities and requirements, finding their way around the building, learning to use the library, and so on. If this practical information is presented in small, informal meetings, so much the better. Later, when they feel they have settled some of these important questions, they will want to know more about extra-curricular activities, student government, clubs, etc., but as incoming students they relegated these aspects of campus life to second place.

If the 30 interviewees could speak as one to faculty and staff members in suggesting Do's and Don'ts for future orientation programs, they would say something like this:

> Give us information which is immediately and directly useful. Don't confuse us with information that we won't need until we're upperclassmen or that we'll pick up as we go along. But help us to pick up that information by maintaining contact with us and by letting us know where we can go to get answers to our questions. When you give us information, just hit the high points because we won't remember the details anyway. Please make it as concrete and uncomplicated as possible, and related, somehow, to what we already know.
>
> We appreciate the chance to talk with you and upperclassmen in small, informal groups, where we can ask questions, express our opinions and even our fears, and make friends. We like the way you welcome us to Hunter and help us to deal with its strangeness. And by the way, it is thoughtful of you to relieve our tension by giving us an enjoyable hour at a Style Show!

FRESHMAN ORIENTATION AND ACTIVITIES

Park Avenue Division

Fall, 1957

Tuesday, Sept. 3 — English Entrance Examinations

Wednesday, Sept. 4 — Late conferences for day and evening freshmen. 4:00 p.m. - 7:00 p.m.

Thursday, Sept. 5 — Training Session for upper class counselors. Office of the Dean of Students, Guidance Bureau. 10:00 a.m. - 12:00 noon.

Park Avenue freshmen pay fees. 1:30 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Distribution of locks and collection of identification pictures. South Lounge. 1:30 - 4:00 p.m.

Registration materials will be distributed. Upper class counselors will be on hand to assist freshmen in getting needed information about registration procedures. 1:30 p.m. - 4:00 p.m. Room 405.

Handicapped students in the Medical Office and Dean's Office. 1:30 - 4:00 p.m.

The Student Advisory Committee of Student Council will serve tea for all freshmen and advanced standing students in the North Lounge. 1:00 p.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Monday, Sept. 9 — Freshman Registration. Upper class student counselors will be present to guide. 9:00 - 11:30 a.m. and 1:15 - 4:00 p.m.

Tuesday, Sept. 10 — Freshman Orientation. Attendance will be taken. Meetings required. 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

10:00 - 10:30 Introduction to Orientation. Playhouse.

10:40 - 12:00 Regulations and Customs of the College Community.

Academic - Guidance Bureau - Professor Barrett

Social - Office of the Dean of Students - Dean Hopwood

12:00 - 1:30 Lunch

1:30 - 5:00 Out of Class Life at Hunter. Playhouse.

Student Government: Leah Green, President of Student Council. 1:30 - 1:45 p.m.

Opportunities in "Extra Curric," Panel of upper class students. 1:45 - 2:15 p.m.

Announcements and Skit, Sonia Rivera, Chairman of Student Advisory Committee, "How not to go through college." Angela Romano, skit chairman. 2:15 - 2:30 p.m.

Tours of Park Avenue Building and Roosevelt House, led by Student Advisory Committee of Student Council. North Lounge, Club Fair. 2:30 - 5:00 p.m. Chairmen: Nora Ramirez, Sandy Cohen.

Wednesday, Sept. 11 Freshman Orientation (cont'd.) Meetings are required. 10:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

10:00 - 11:30 The Liberal Arts Community in Action. Discussion of "The Age of Reason" with students and faculty members participating. Student moderator: Leah Green. Playhouse.

11:30 - 12:00 Fame - taught by Professor Emile. Playhouse.

12:00 - 1:30 Lunch.

1:30 - 3:00 College is Different. (Rooms to be announced) 20 discussion groups with upper class counselors participating. Directed by the Guidance Bureau.

3:00 - 5:00 Tours of Park Avenue Building and Roosevelt House: Student Advisory Committee.

Thursday, Sept. 12 Late Registration
Late Fees. 9:30 - 11:00
Distribution of locks and collection of identification pictures. Room 100.

Friday, Sept. 13 Freshmen Convocation - (Park Avenue and Bronx Divisions) with academic procession. Speaker: President Shuster. Members of Advisory Committees will usher. Parents of the lower freshmen and advnaced standing students are invited to attend. 10:00 a.m. Assembly Hall at Park Avenue.

Coffee Hour for parents of freshmen and advanced standing students. North Lounge. 11:15 - 12:00. Faculty attending Convocation also invited.

September 16 - 23 Student Advisory Committee - Information Tables in Commons and Main Floor.

Wednesday, Sept. 18 Opening Convocation. Required assembly for all classes at Park Avenue Division. Assembly Hall. 12:30 p.m. - Students are asked to be seated by 12:30. The Faculty Academic procession will begin promptly at 12:45 p.m.

September 16 - 20 All freshmen are required to attend 3 meetings as follows:

2 Sessions of Social Orientation at Roosevelt House; conducted by Professor Margaret Rendt.

1 Session, "Know Your Library" directed by the Library Staff and the Guidance Bureau, assisted by upper class counselors.

Friday, Sept. 20 Orientation Session for late registrants. Guidance Bureau and Office of the Dean of Students. 12:10 - 1:00 p.m. Playhouse.

September 20 - 22 Freshman Camp, Amy Whelan, coordinator.

Wednesday, Sept. 25 Style Show for Freshmen, sponsored by Panhellenic. Attendance is required. Playhouse. 12:15 - 1:00 p.m.

Wednesday, Oct. 9 Frosh Show, stump speaking and hazing. Playhouse. 12:15 Chairman: Bitsy Solomon.

Friday, Oct. 11 Frosh Dance ("Queen for a Knight") Student Advisory Committee. Chairman: Brunilda Fernandez.

Wednesday, Oct. 16 Vocational Futures sponsored by Guidance Bureau, Placement Bureau, Pre-Medical Advisory Committee, and Education Department. 12:15 - 2:00 p.m.

1. Jobs for Young Liberal Arts Graduates
2. So You Want to be a Teacher
3. Doctors, Dentists, and Veterinarians To Be
4. Occupations Uncertain

Thursday, Oct. 17 Reception for Parents of Lower Freshmen. 7:45 p.m. Playhouse.

Wednesday, Oct. 23 Looking Ahead to Next Term. Guidance Bureau. 12:15 - 2:00.

Social Science Group
Science Group
Language Group
Art, Music, etc.
Foreign Students

Wednesday, Oct. 30 Freshman Posture Tests. Professor Zuckerman.

SCHEDULE FOR LIBRARY TOURS
September 1957
Park Avenue

Day	Date	Period	Time
Monday	9/16	2	10:10
		4	12:10
Tuesday	9/17	4	12:10
		6	2:10
Wednesday	9/18	2	10:10
		3	11:10
		7	3:10
Thursday	9/19	2	10:10
		5	1:10
Friday	9/20	3	11:10
		5	1:10
		6	2:10
Monday	9/23	3	11:10
		4	12:10
		7	3:10
Tuesday	9/24	5	1:10
		7	3:10
Wednesday	9/25	3	11:10
		6	2:10

_____Director
The Guidance Bureau

EVALUATION OF FRESHMAN ORIENTATION - Winter, 1957

Freshman Interview Form

Interview No._____

Date_____

Age_____ High School attended_____

Was high school a religious school?_____If yes, specify:_____

Was high school coed?_____Estimate size of high school_____

First recall re orientation activities:

Any specific use of orientation information in college so far?

Other comments (review of orientation program):

Over-all evaluation:

Suggestions for future orientation programs: